



At 4:45 A.M. on Saturday, July 30, 1864, 8000 pounds of gunpowder detonated underground near Petersburg, Virginia. *“It was a magnificent spectacle,”* wrote Federal Major William Powell. Within moments Union forces charged forward through the smoke and debris. *“Little did these men anticipate what they would see upon arriving there,”* continued Powell, *“an enormous hole in the ground....filled with dust, great blocks of clay, guns, broken carriages, projecting timbers, and men buried in various ways—some up to their necks, others to their waists, and some with only their feet and legs protruding from the earth....wounded men died there begging piteously for water...”*

When the idea of digging a lengthy tunnel under Confederate lines first surfaced, it was greeted with much skepticism. Federal engineers dismissed the notion as *“claptrap and nonsense.”* Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants, a civil engineer and commander of the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry, thought otherwise. Many men of Pleasants’ regiment were former coal miners from Schuylkill County, and one of them was overheard to say that a tunnel filled with explosives could dislodge the formidable Confederate lines. Pleasants admitted that others warned him *“I would either get the men smothered for want of air, or crushed by the falling of the earth....”* Digging began on June 25 with Pleasants devising an ingenious ventilation system. With the tunnel completed in a month, four additional days were required to place 320 kegs of gunpowder into two lateral galleries. The miners improvised a lengthy fuse to extend to the explosives.

When the gunpowder blew, a gigantic hole was ripped into the ground. The *“Crater,”* as it came to be known, measured 170’ in length, 60’ to 80’ wide, and 30’ deep. Federal forces charged in, perhaps prematurely, and literally tumbled into the massive pit. Those who attempted to climb out lost their footing on the loose soil while others fell on those trying to escape. Confederates counterattacked, rimming the Crater, shooting into the nearly helpless Federals who floundered about in their huge, earthen barrel. Fighting would continue until 1:00 P.M. *“The sun was pouring its fierce heat down upon us and the suffering wounded,”* wrote Federal Major Charles H. Houghton. *“No air was stirring within the crater. It was a sickening sight: men were dead and dying all around us; blood was streaming down the sides of the crater to the bottom, where it gathered in pools for a time before being absorbed by the hard, red clay.”* Federal casualties numbered 3789; Confederates about 1500. It was a *“stupendous failure,”* stated a dejected Ulysses S. Grant, *“and the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war.”*

On **MONDAY, MARCH 26** the MRRT will welcome **John Vohlken** who will present *“The Construction of Doom, the Mine at Petersburg.”* John is currently the newsletter editor for the Grand Rapids Civil War Round Table. John will explain and demonstrate the enormous difficulties of the tunnel’s construction with a cross-section model of the mine. He will further reveal the brilliance of the ventilation system with replicas of the cracker boxes used to haul away the dirt and a full size reproduction of the frames used to shore up the sides and roof to physically show the limited space for the diggers. John is a graduate of Western Michigan University with a degree in Engineering Graphics. This program is one you absolutely will not want to miss!

The MRRT lost another valued member, Max Brill, who passed away on February 23. Max was professor of Psychology emeritus and taught at Oakland University for 21 years. His interests included literature, art, poetry, theater, science, chess, and of course, Civil War. Our condolences are extended to his wife, Mary. Max will be greatly missed.

Our thanks to last month’s speaker, **Liz Stringer**, for her excellent presentation, *“Wartime Fredericksburg.”* Liz filled her program with informative and unusual anecdotal material in relating the poignant story of a city besieged by warfare.

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Treasurer Carroll Tietz, who may be at this month’s meeting after a sojourn in Florida, relates that we have 71 paid members. However, 34 folks are still delinquent with this year’s dues. To avoid having the dreaded **RED DOT** affixed to



your next month's newsletter and dropping you from our roles, you should have a check ready for Carroll or mail it to him in the handy envelope he provided for you. [10640 Gamewood Dr. South Lyon, 48178]

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FALL FIELD TRIP: Last month 57 folks signed up for the October 20-21 trip to Gettysburg. More may be interested in adding their names to the list, BUT you'll have to

QUIZ: All questions pertain to the Petersburg Campaign.....

1. Which Union general, born in Granada, Spain, led a division of black troops that stormed the "Crater"? And, what was his profession both before and after the Civil War?
2. Which Union general, whose troops spearheaded the attack into the "Crater," was forced to resign for his drunkenness at this battle? And, with which fellow general did he supposedly "pass a bottle of rum back and forth" while their troops were being slaughtered?
3. Name the 5 railroads that fed the city of Petersburg.
4. Which 2 Confederate brothers from Petersburg, one a general the other a colonel, were killed on February 6 and April 1, 1865, respectively? And, at which 2 battles did they lose their lives?
5. Which Federal unit at Petersburg suffered the largest loss in any battle with 635 out of 900 killed or wounded? And, which Confederate general was killed by two Pennsylvania soldiers on April 2 near Petersburg?
6. On March 25, 1865, Robert E. Lee ordered a final desperate offensive east of Petersburg at a redoubt on the far right side of Ulysses Grant's line. Where did this failed attack take place and who led it?
7. Which 3 Confederate Major Generals were enjoying a shad bake while their armies were being mauled at Five Forks on March 31, 1865?
8. Twenty-four-year-old James Dearing was the last Confederate general to die of battle wounds on April 23, 1865, from being shot on April 6 in a pistol duel on horseback with a Federal Lieutenant Colonel. Name the Federal officer that mortally wounded Dearing and where did this fight occur?
9. Which former Governor of Virginia (at the time of John Brown's execution) and a brother-in-law of George Meade, was given a general's commission and fought in the Petersburg Campaign? And, what was the "Petersburg Express"?
10. During the long Petersburg Campaign, which Federal general commanded the Army of the James at Bermuda Hundred? And, after being stymied in attacking Petersburg, Grant attempted to defeat Lee's army by severing the Weldon Railroad. What was another name for this fight?

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Following the Battle of Gettysburg nearly 13,000 Confederate wounded remained scattered in and around the town. The Union army had close to 15,000 of its own injured needing attention. One remarkable case of a wounded soldier was encountered by a nurse, Sister Mary David Salomon, who was originally from Alsace, France. Sister Mary was a "Daughter of Charity," a group which came up from St. Joseph's Convent in Emmitsburg, Maryland, to help with the many wounded from the battle. Her recollection of her nursing efforts centered upon an unnamed soldier who had had both his legs and arms torn off by the explosion of an artillery shell. "I can see him now after all these years," wrote Sister Mary, "only the head and trunk of a man as they brought him in and leaned him up against a corner."

Another depiction, equally as graphic, was penned by Charles P. Cole the editor of a Courtland, New York newspaper, the **Gazette and Banner**. Cole had traveled to the battlefield to locate the body of a hometown resident killed there on July 1. He arrived on Monday, July 6, and after completing his intended mission, Cole decided to visit some sections of



the field, and a few of the hospitals. The first place Cole happened upon was the main edifice of Pennsylvania College, a large white building used as the student dormitory and classrooms when school was in session. Now the three-story structure had been converted into a Confederate hospital. In one of the rooms Cole chanced upon a Mississippi officer, who as a civilian, Cole had met in New York before the war. That officer was only slightly injured, but nearby, in sharp contrast, was another soldier in much worse condition. Cole wrote:

In the same room we witnessed a scene which was heartrending indeed, and one which we never wish to see again. A young captain in the rebel army from Georgia was lying upon a blanket on the floor, having had both legs and arms shot off in the terrific battle of Wednesday. His features were fine, and his countenance strikingly intellectual. A day or so before the battle he had received a letter from his young wife, but as yet had not read it, and while we were present he asked one of his comrades to open the letter and read it to him....The letter was filled with assurances of prayers and blessings for the Southern army, and urging her husband to fight gallantly for the cause of the South. Alas! He had fought his last fight! A moment after, a surgeon addressed him, saying, "Captain, we can do nothing for you; you can live but a short time." Tears rolled down the pale face of the young man, but he had not a hand to wipe them away. We wiped the tears from his eyes and gave him some water, when he looked up, and said, "Thank God, I am going to die beneath the stars and stripes." We could not help turning away and weeping.

Cole's account was published in the Courtland newspaper on July 16. An attempt was made by Cole to find out the identity of this Georgian. Of all the Georgia captains who died as a result of the battle, only two could be verified as having been wounded on the first of July, Captains John T. Lane, 4th Georgia Infantry, and Virgil T. Nunnerly, 13th Georgia Infantry. The records show that Nunnerly was "killed" on July 1, and that Lane was "wounded in the left arm," and died on July 25. Furthermore, six identified Confederate burials near Pennsylvania College were examined, but none met any of the necessary criteria. Perhaps it is best that the identity of this young soldier remains unknown.

QUIZ ANSWERS:

1. Edward Ferrero and a ballroom dance teacher
2. James Ledlie and Edward Ferrero
3. Richmond & Petersburg RR, City Point RR, Southside RR, Weldon RR, Norfolk RR
4. John and Willie Pegram/Hatcher's Run and Five Forks
5. 1st Maine Heavy Artillery and A.P. Hill
6. Fort Stedman and John Brown Gordon
7. George Pickett, Tom Rosser, and Fitzhugh Lee
8. Theodore Read and High Bridge
9. Henry A. Wise and another name for the famous 13-inch mortar commonly called "The Dictator"
10. Benjamin "Beast" Butler and Globe Tavern

You are all cordially invited to our **MONDAY, MARCH 26** meeting to hear what promises to be a phenomenal talk—*"The Construction of Doom, the Mine at Petersburg"*—given by **John Vohlken**. We will meet in the Farmington Library (Grand River and Farmington Road) at 6:30 P.M. Be there early and bring a friend.

Also try our website: <http://www.farmlib.org/mrrt/>.